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15 September 1986POLAND: THE POLITICS OF CONCILIATION?

The Jaruzelski regime's game plan is becoming clearer. General Kiszczak, the increasing influential interior minister, sketched its main lines in an interview given last Friday. Banking on the growing weariness and apolitical resignation of the population -- trends suggested in a recent opinion survey by a respected Polish sociologist -- the regime evidently is trying to erode Solidarity's support and defuse opposition sentiment through largely cosmetic measures and promises of greater public involvement in political life. In return for these conciliatory gestures, the regime is making several specific demands:

- cessation of "illegal" activity by regime opponents;
- efforts by the Church to silence the more critical parish priests and to encourage national reconciliation; and
- positive moves by Western governments, particularly the US, toward improved relations.

Taming the Opposition. The scope of the current prisoner release has far exceeded expectations. There are sure to be disputes as to how many remain in jail, but it appears that the great majority, including prominent opposition figures, will be set free and allowed to reenter society without reprisals (a key Church demand). Some will no doubt find themselves behind bars once again.

- The regime would surely not hesitate to reimprison opposition figures engaging in flagrant antiregime activities, but would prefer to see its opponents tamed and public life "normalized."
- Most Solidarity activists have in any case adopted a wait-and-see attitude, focusing on intellectual and organizational spadework rather than protest actions.

The Church's Attitude. Having shelved the agricultural aid fund idea, the Church is focusing on more limited aims: the release of political prisoners and their reintegration into public life, formation of social groups independent of the ruling party, creation of a broad-based social consultative council, and, above all, preservation of its own role in the spiritual life of the nation. Toward those ends, the Church is probably prepared to make some significant gestures of its own.

- It is not to be excluded that the Church, concerned over the economic (and ultimately the spiritual) health of the country, took it on itself to withdraw from the agricultural aid fund program so as to remove a stumbling block to improved US-Polish relations.

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Pressure on the US. Already pressure is increasing for us to move toward "normal" bilateral relations with Poland.

- The Polish-American Congress reportedly is mounting a campaign to improve US-Polish relations. It says that Polish Church leaders are encouraged by the prisoner release and the prospects for dialogue between the regime and independent groups in Poland.

Of course, the prisoner release and other moves by the Polish regime were prompted by domestic considerations rather than any desire to mollify the US, and future steps by the regime will likewise be determined by its reading of the domestic situation. However, the improvement of relations with the US is seen as an important side benefit, from which the Poles hope to gain economic advantages.

- Our ability to exact domestic concessions for an easing of sanctions will continue to be limited.
- The points of maximum leverage will be on issues already supported by the Church and Solidarity: the composition and prerogatives of the planned social consultative council and the extent to which independent social groups are permitted to emerge and operate.

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